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ABSTRACT

Every year approximately 1,300 first-year students at the Rochester Institute of Technology complete a 50-minute placement essay during summer and fall orientations. The essays are scored holistically, and the students are placed into one of three levels of an English composition course. At the end of the 10-week quarter of instruction, students take an exit exam which is rated as either "passing" or "incomplete." International students take the same placement exams, but their essays are graded by instructors knowledgeable in English as a Second Language. The results are used for placement in English composition and for referrals into second language instruction. Learning disabled students are allowed to take their exams in the most appropriate environment and may use a word processor. Deaf or hearing impaired students (approximately 293 undergraduates in academic year 1991-92, once they are placed into English composition, have the option of enrolling in a section restricted to deaf students, or taking the course with hearing students and using the services of an interpreter and notetaker. In 1990, placement and exit exams of 120 randomly-selected freshmen were holistically and anonymously scored. Results indicated that: (1) the majority of students demonstrated improved writing skills after the course; (2) placement and exit tests can be accepted as valid; and (3) the holistic exams used can be considered reliable. (RS)

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Large-Scale Writing Assessment: Methods, Accommodations and Reliability

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This talk was presented at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication, as part of a panel titled, "Assessment Issues: General Competency, Career Prep, and Special Student Populations."

Introduction

This presentation will provide an overview of the large-scale writing assessment model that is fundamental to the English Composition program at Rochester Institute of Technology. I will describe the administration and scoring of our **placement and exit tests**, the **accommodations** we make for special student populations (international, deaf and learning disabled), and the **research** we conducted in 1990 which compared students' writing before and after they had taken English Composition.

Composition Program

Since the verbal abilities of incoming RIT students vary tremendously, over a decade ago the department of Language and Literature decided to offer English Composition in three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. Students are placed into these levels according to their performance on a holistically-scored essay, and many times the student's Test of Standard Written English (or TSWE) score is also considered when making a placement decision. In order to guarantee that students completing English Composition have a minimal level of writing competence, **all** students enrolled in the course -- regardless of their placement level -- take an exit exam in common during the last week of class.

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Orientation Testing

The writing ability of students entering RIT is first assessed during our summer and fall orientations. Each year during the orientations, approximately 1300 first-year students complete a fifty-minute placement essay on a topic requiring only general knowledge.

Essay Scoring Procedures

The placement essays, which I administer with the help of the orientation staff and a composition instructor, are scored holistically on a scale of 1 through 6, with 1 being the lowest score. The readers are experienced composition faculty who teach the course and participate in practice scoring sessions each year. The scoring guide we use reflects the objectives of the course. For example, an essay with a score of 1 is described as having "many serious grammatical, spelling and diction errors, with poor organization and development of ideas." Representing the highest score on the placement scale, a rating of 6 is characterized as being "generally free of errors, having very good unity and coherence, with paragraphs employing an argument or multiple illustrations that are more than merely commonplace." The essay also demonstrates "an evident sense of style and perhaps, an effective use of humor or irony."

During the scoring process, each student essay is read by two different readers and given two scores. In general, based on those scores, the students are placed into the three levels of English Composition, as follows:

Scores of 1 and 1 through 2 and 2: Basic Composition

Scores of 3 and 3 through 4 and 4: Intermediate Composition

Scores of 5 and 5 through 6 and 6: Advanced Composition

However, an essay with two scores of more than one point difference is given a third reading, and scores of 3/3 and 4/4 are actually considered "borderline." In these cases, the student's Test of Standard Written English score, and/or SAT verbal score, is used to help determine the appropriate level of placement.

Exit Exam

At the end of the ten-week quarter of instruction, students taking English Composition are given an exit exam which is administered in class by the instructor. In scoring the exit exam, we do not use the 1 through 6 scale used for placement, but instead rate the exams simply as "passing" or "incomplete." Instructors do not evaluate their own students' exams; instead, the exams are distributed anonymously by section among all composition instructors. Each exam is then read and scored by two people other than the student's own professor.

According to the scoring guide created by the faculty, a passing exit exam must display a logical organizational plan; attempt to develop ideas through details and examples; and contain only occasional errors in grammar and spelling. Furthermore, these errors must not seriously impede communication. An exit exam is rated as "incomplete" when it is disorganized; if it contains insufficient concrete details or examples; or if it contains frequent errors in grammar or spelling. Furthermore, in essays evaluated as "incomplete," these errors often seriously impede communication.

If a student receives a split score of one "Incomplete" and one "Pass" on

the exit exam, the exam is read by a third reader. Students who receive two "I's" on their exam do not receive credit for the course until they pass a re-test. If an instructor believes a student's score on the exam does not reflect the student's true ability, the instructor can immediately re-test the student, and the exam is scored again by two outside readers. This obviously prolongs the scoring process, and each person who re-tests a student must be willing to continue reading and scoring the re-tests of others. However, by allowing students and instructors the option of an immediate re-test, we have tried to eliminate any perception of arbitrariness or unfairness in the system. If a student deserves a second chance, the instructor has the means to provide it, and about half of those students who are immediately re-tested do pass. The initial failure rate on the exit exam varies from quarter to quarter, but is approximately 10% of those enrolled. The final failure rate, after the re-tests, is approximately 5-7% . In most cases, these students sign a contract agreeing to work in the Writing Lab of RIT's Learning Development Center, and although they have two quarters in which to re-take and pass the exam, most do so within ten weeks.

Accommodations for Special Populations

The ways in which the placement and exit exams are administered are modified for students in several special populations at RIT. Shortly after they arrive on campus, **international students,** of whom there are currently **397** undergraduates, are given the same placement exam as other students as part of a general assessment of their English skills in reading, writing and conversation. In this instance, the placement exam is administered along with the Michigan Test, and is scored by instructors in

the English Language Center, instead of the composition staff. The instructors reading the exam are experienced in teaching English as a Second Language, and their evaluation of the international students' writing is used for referrals into ESOL instruction, as well as placement in English Composition. In fact, they use the same scoring guide used by Composition instructors, with the exception that the lower range of the scale is further sub-divided in order to make distinctions for ESOL placement. By allowing one essay to serve two purposes, we have eliminated redundant testing during the orientation period, maximized the usefulness of a single test for assessment and placement purposes, and minimized the amount of staff time spent in the assessment process. Later, when the international students take the exit exam they may be given extra time to complete the exam, at the instructor's discretion.

Currently at RIT, approximately **170** students have been identified by the federally-funded Office of Special Services as having a learning disability. These **learning disabled** students, at their request or that of the Office of Special Services, are allowed extra time on the placement and exit exams. They may also take the exams privately in a quiet room rather than in the auditorium where placement exams are given or in the classroom where exit exams are given. They are allowed to use a word processor, and through Special Services, the students are provided proctors so that they may take their exams in the most appropriate environment. For some students, that means taking the exit exam in their dorm room, on their own word processor, under the supervision of a proctor.

There are approximately **293 deaf or hard-of-hearing students** enrolled in RIT baccalaureate programs. Through a combination of their scores on the Michigan Test and the California Reading Test, these students are identified as having English skills at one of 4 levels: preparatory, marginally qualified, provisionally qualified or proficient. Only at the "proficient" level, that is having a Michigan score of greater than or equal to 80 and a California score of greater than or equal to 10, are students allowed to take the placement test for English Composition. Below the "proficient" level, "provisionally qualified" students take the placement exam for pre-Composition courses; "marginally qualified" students complete 20 hours of English at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and build a writing portfolio for review before being allowed to take the placement test for pre-Composition courses; and "preparatory" students, that is, those with Michigan scores equal to or below 60 and California scores equal to or below 8.0, must begin their English studies with at least 20 credits of NTID English before moving on to the portfolio and then placement evaluations.

Once they are placed in English Composition, deaf and hard-of-hearing students have the option of enrolling in a section restricted to deaf students or of taking the course with hearing students, in which case an interpreter and notetaker will be assigned to the class. Students in the deaf sections are allowed 2 hours for the exit exam, and those in non-deaf sections may also be given extra time, at the instructor's discretion.

Later in this program Dr. Jeannee Sacken, Writing Coordinator for NTID, will discuss how the College of Business at RIT has modified its writing competency exam to accommodate deaf students who are meeting graduation requirements for a baccalaureate degree in business.

Research Project 1990-91

In the summer of 1990, at the request of the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Dr. Joseph Nassar and I designed a research project to measure the improvement in student writing during English Composition. With the help of a statistics professor from the College of Science,we developed a model for comparing the placement and exit exams of students taking English Composition. Not only did the study provide valuable information on the improvement in student writing, it also helped us draw some conclusions about the validity and reliability of our approach to writing assessment .

Design

In this study, the placement and exit exams of a randomly selected group of 120 freshmen were holistically scored and rated on to a 1-6 scale by a group of experienced English Composition instructors. Each exam was scored "blindly" by two different readers. Since the compostion course is offered at three "levels," the study was designed so that there were equal numbers of students drawn from each level. Thus, we randomly selected 40 students each, from the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of English Composition. Ultimately, 118 students participated in the study.

During a day-long scoring session, which included coffee and lunch breaks, four readers each read 12 bundles of exams (10 exams per bundle). The bundles had no identifying information, that is, readers did not know who the students were, which level of Composition they had taken, or whether an exam was a placement or exit test. The bundle distribution plan guaranteed that each student's placement and exit exams were read by the same two readers. For the purposes of this study, all exams (placement and exit) were scored on the 1-6 scale we usually use for placement. Thus, each student writer was assigned two 2-number scores, one pair for the placement exam and one pair for the exit exam.

For example, a student might receive a 2 and 3 on the placement exam, and a 3 and 4 on the exit exam. Combining each pair of scores would result in a total score of 5 on the placement exam and a total score of 7 on the exit, for an increase in 2 points.

Findings

Our analysis of the comparison of 118 students' scores on the placement and exit exams indicated that 70 students, a clear majority, received higher scores on their exit exam than on their placement exam. There were 24 students whose scores remained the same and also 24 whose exit exam was lower than their placement exam. Since variability in test scores can be attributed to many sources, the statistical model we used attempted to account for differences in students, course instructors, and readers. Most of the variability in test scores was attributed to differences in students; in fact, the combined differences attributed to instructors and readers was

less than the differences attributed to students. Thus, the differences in instructors and readers could not be said to significantly affect student scores.The frequency and degree of change, however, did correlate with the students' placement level. Students enrolled in the intermediate level sections demonstrated the greatest frequency and degree of positive change, followed by the students in basic sections, and then those in advanced sections.

Validity and Reliablity

The findings of this research study were heartening for several reasons. First, as we would hope, the majority of students demonstrated improved writing skills after the course, when their placement and exit exams were compared. Second, because we used a scoring guide which was developed by faculty and which ranks students essays according to characteristics of writing we would like to see developed in the course, the placement and exit tests can be accepted as valid, since they assess student ability according to agreed-upon, course-based criteria. Finally, by demonstrating that differences in instructors and readers were not significant in affecting students' scores, the research indicated that the results could be replicated and that the holistic exams we use for assessing writing in English Composition can be considered reliable.

I'd like to now introduce Prof. Marcia Birken, Assistant Department Head in Mathematics, from RIT's College of Science. Prof. Birken is going to discuss writing assessment and career preparation for mathematics students.